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Jusepe de Ribera, called Lo Spagnoletto

(Jativa, Valencia 1591 – 1652 Naples)

Saint Jerome Reading

oil on canvas
103.2 x 149.2 cm.

Provenance

Don Pedro Enrique de Bragança e Ligne Sousa Tavares Mascarenhas da Silva (1718–61), 1st Duke of Lafões, Marquess of Arronches, and 7th Earl of Miranda do Corvo, Portugal;
With Trafalgar Galleries, London, 1970;
Private collection, 1971;
With Trafalgar Galleries, London, 1975 (according to Nicolson, see *Literature*);
Anonymous sale, London, Christie's, 6 July 2006, lot 49;
Angelo Guido Terruzzi – Terruzzi Family Foundation, Villa Regina Margherita, Milan;
Anonymous sale, Genoa, Wannenes, 5 March 2024, lot 118.

Literature

B. Nicolson, *The International caravaggesque movement*, Oxford 1979, p. 19 (as circle of Dirck van Baburen);
B. Nicolson, *Caravaggism in Europe*, L. Vertova (rev.), Turin 1990, vol. I, pp. 57 and 102, and vol. III, reproduced fig. 990 (as possibly Wouter Crabeth, or circle of Dirck van Baburen);
N. Spinosa, in *Jusepe de Ribera 1591 – 1652*, A.E. Pérez Sánchez and N. Spinosa (eds), exh. cat., Naples 1992, p. 55 (as attributed to Wouter Crabeth);
Possibly M. Maccherini, 'Caravaggio e caravaggeschi nell'epistolario di Giulio Mancini', doctoral diss., Università degli studi di Roma 'La Sapienza', 1994, p. 279;
Possibly M. Maccherini, 'Caravaggio nel carteggio familiare di Giulio Mancini', in *Prospettiva*, no. 86, April 1997, p. 92, n. 100;
Possibly M. Gallo, 'Ulteriori dati sulla chiesa dei SS. Luca e Martina e sugli esordi di Jusepe de Ribera. Lo Spagnoletto, Reni, Borgianni, Gentileschi, Pedro Nuñez portoghese, Alessandro Fortuna ed altri artisti in nuovi documenti dell'Accademia di San Luca', in *Storia dell'Arte*, vol. 93/94, 1998, pp. 317 and 328, n. 62;
N. Spinosa, *Ribera. L'opera completa*, Naples 2003, p. 232, n. 45, and p. 249, no. A3;
G. Papi, 'Ancora su Ribera a Roma', in *Les Cahiers d'Histoire de l'Art*, no. 1, 2003, pp. 68–69 and 73, n. 17, reproduced in colour p. 68, fig. 11;

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G. Papi, in *Caravaggio e l'Europa, da Caravaggio a Mattia Preti*, V. Sgarbi (ed.), exh. cat., Milan 2005, p. 252, no. III.2, reproduced in colour p. 253;

N. Spinosa, in *José de Ribera. Bajo el signo de Caravaggio (1613-1633)*, exh. cat., Salamanca 2005 ed., pp. 44–45, no. 2; Valencia-Sevilla 2005 ed., pp. 60–63, no. 2;

N. Spinosa, *Ribera. L'opera completa*, Naples 2006, p. 257, no. A4, reproduced, and p. 395, under no. C13;

G. Papi, *Ribera a Roma*, Soncino 2007, pp. 137–38, no. 11, reproduced in colour p. 75, plate XV;

N. Spinosa, *Ribera. La obra completa*, Madrid 2008, pp. 308–09, no. A11, reproduced, and p. 316, under no. A23;

G. Finaldi, in *El Joven Ribera*, J. Portùs and J. Milicua (eds), exh. cat., Madrid 2011, p. 124, under no. 10; and N.

Spinosa, in *Il giovane Ribera tra Roma, Parma e Napoli 1608-1624*, J. Portùs and J. Milicua (eds), Italian edition, Naples 2011, p. 221;

A. Scarpa and M. Lupo, *Fondazione Famiglia Terruzzi. Villa Regina Margherita. Guida al museo*, Milan 2011, p. 56, reproduced p. 116, fig. 45.

Exhibited

Salamanca, Sala de Exposiciones de San Eloy; Valencia, Museo de Bellas Artes; and Seville, Museo de Bellas Artes, *José de Ribera. Bajo el signo de Caravaggio (1613-1633)*, 2005, no. 2;

Milan, Palazzo Reale; and Vienna, Liechtenstein Museum, *Caravaggio e l'Europa*, 15 October 2005 – 9 July 2006, no. III.2.

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This highly emotive and atmospheric portrayal of Saint Jerome is one of the earliest works in Jusepe de Ribera's *œuvre*, and the artist's very first of almost thirty depictions of the saint, which he produced throughout his relatively long life. Having been previously attributed both to a Northern European artist working in Rome in the circle of Dirck van Baburen, and the rather obscure Dutch painter, Wouter Pietersz. Crabeth II, this painting was recognised and published independently by both Nicola Spinosa and Gianni Papi in 2003 as by Ribera, dating to his early years in Rome, *circa* 1612, when the artist was just twenty years old. Impressive in size, this powerful and dramatic painting reflects the influence of Caravaggio and his French and Flemish followers on the young Spanish painter, but in the distinctive rendering of the saint's flesh, the red drapery, and the expressive characterisation of his face, it is also possible to see the incipient, distinctive style that is entirely Ribera's own, which would in turn inspire artists of the subsequent decades.

Ribera, who was born in 1591 in the town of Jativa, near Valencia, is believed to have moved from Spain to Italy possibly as early as 1604-05, after which it seems likely that he spent time in Rome, conceivably in the workshop of Caravaggio along with artists such as Antonio Galli del Spadarino, Cecco del Caravaggio and Bartolomeo Manfredi.¹ If this was the case, Ribera's nickname of 'lo Spagnoletto' would tally with his arrival in the city at a very young age. Having gone to Parma in 1611 for up to a year, and returning to the Eternal City in around 1612, Ribera is firmly documented there in 1613 as a member of the Accademia di San Luca, and is known to have stayed in Rome until September 1616, when he left for Naples and became the leading painter there.

Ribera's earliest works have long been the subject of debate amongst scholars, leading to exhibitions such as 'The Young Ribera', held in Madrid and Naples in 2011, which specifically address this period of his career. Many of the works now attributed to the youthful artist, including this painting, have been given to other artists in the past. Roberto Longhi in 1957, for example, devised the moniker 'Master of the Judgement of Solomon', based on the subject of the canvas in the Galleria Borghese, around which he formed a group of paintings presumed to be by an artist of probable French origins, active in Rome in the second decade of the seventeenth century. All these paintings are now accepted as Ribera's early works, along with a number of other additions, amounting to a group of over 50 pictures, strengthening the argument

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that Ribera appears already to have established himself as an artist in the city prior to his arrival there from Parma in 1612.

This painting may be usefully compared stylistically with others of Ribera's earliest works, notably the *Beggar* in the Galleria Borghese, Rome (fig. 1), also dated to 1612, in which the highlights on the man's hands and his careworn brow directly recall those of Saint Jerome, here. Indeed, it was on the basis of these shared characteristics that the paintings were long associated with one another, though until their reattribution to Ribera in 2002/2003 they bore a connection to Crabeth.² Other canvases from these first years in Rome likewise display the almost sculptural quality of the drapery that is found in the saint's robe in the present work, the smooth weightiness of the fabric contrasting directly with the animation of the flesh and expression of the figure – see, for example, the *Saint Bartholomew* from the 'Cussida Apostle Series', today in the Longhi Foundation, Florence (fig. 2), circa 1612, or the figure of the eponymous saint in *The Liberation of Saint Peter*, also in the Galleria Borghese, Rome (fig. 3), circa 1613.

All these paintings reflect the influence on Ribera of the sometimes unforgiving naturalism and theatrical effect of *chiaroscuro* propagated by Caravaggio and his circle. The use of light and shadow here, for example, creates not only a dramatic sense of atmosphere, but also takes on a certain symbolic significance. Most brightly illuminated are the saint's high forehead, the book he is studying, the skull – a *memento mori* almost projecting into the viewer's space – and his rather raddled body, together conveying his intense spirituality and intellect. Though the saint's recognisable attribute of the lion appears prominently, Ribera has deliberately chosen not to represent Jerome in his guise as a cardinal, nor to make any specific allusion to his Latin translation of the Bible, the Vulgate, but rather to focus on his life as a penitent. This early depiction of Saint Jerome is representative of Ribera's lifelong predilection for emphasising the pathos associated with his subjects, rather than the traditional iconography of biographical episodes. This inclination was also in line with the intentions of the Catholic Church during the Counter Reformation in the first half of the 17th century, when the aim of religious images was to inspire devotional sentiments of awe and repentance.

The present painting should also be compared with another early depiction of Saint Jerome, incidentally Ribera's first signed work – the painting of 1614-15 today in the Art Gallery of Ontario, Toronto (fig. 4), which was likewise previously attributed to Crabeth, despite its signature.³ Stylistically the paintings have much in common,

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particularly in the rendering of the flesh, with the use of white highlights in the folds of the skin and modelling of the muscles, as well as the chromatic tone of the vermilion red robe. Though the Toronto painting is upright in format, the disposition of the saint and the books is also very similar. Scholars agree unanimously, however, that the present work must precede that in Toronto by at least a couple of years.

As Ribera's two earliest paintings of Saint Jerome, both this and the Toronto painting have in the past been associated with Giulio Mancini (1559-1630), papal physician, art collector, dealer and writer, whose contemporary accounts of Caravaggio, Annibale Carracci, and indeed Ribera, are some of the most valuable early sources of biographical information on the artists. In a letter of 26 June 1615 to his brother Deifebo, in Siena, Mancini recounts that he had bought a Saint Jerome by 'Spagnioletto' [*sic.*] in Rome, along with a copy of Caravaggio's 'Musicians' (presumably the painting today in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), for 25 *scudi*, and that he had already refused a subsequent offer of 40 *scudi* for the Jerome alone. Aside from documenting the clear economic success of Ribera's paintings at this time, Mancini's letter also contains an interesting critical assessment, or report of contemporary opinion, of Ribera's work and reputation: 'venendo a Roma, havendo studiato in Parma, dette speranza e mostrò gran cose, poi si raffreddò' ('coming to Rome, having studied in Parma, at first he showed great promise, and then cooled down').⁴ Mancini writes that he bought the Saint Jerome because it was representative of Ribera's highly successful "first" style in Rome, which he subsequently deemed to change. It may be presumed from a further letter to his brother in 1617 that Mancini particularly prized Ribera's overtly Caravaggesque paintings, such as the present work, when he wrote: 'è comun opinione che del colorito sia stato più padrone che Michelangelo' ('it is commonly believed that he was a better master of colour than Michelangelo [Caravaggio]'), and noted the prodigious speed at which the artist was capable of working.⁵

Despite the fact that there are no specified measurements or more precise description of the work purchased by Mancini, so it cannot be conclusively identified with either *Saint Jerome*, it is generally believed that his letter most likely refers to the canvas now in Toronto, also because it is probably one and the same as the painting that appears in the Chigi inventory of 1698 (and Mancini acted as agent for Agostino Chigi (1563-1639) earlier in the century). Another intriguing early record appears in the inventory of the assets of Scipione Lancellotti, in 1640, which notes 'Un Quadro

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di S.Girolamo originale del Spagnoletto con cornice nera' ('an original painting of Saint Jerome by Spagnoletto with a black frame').⁶

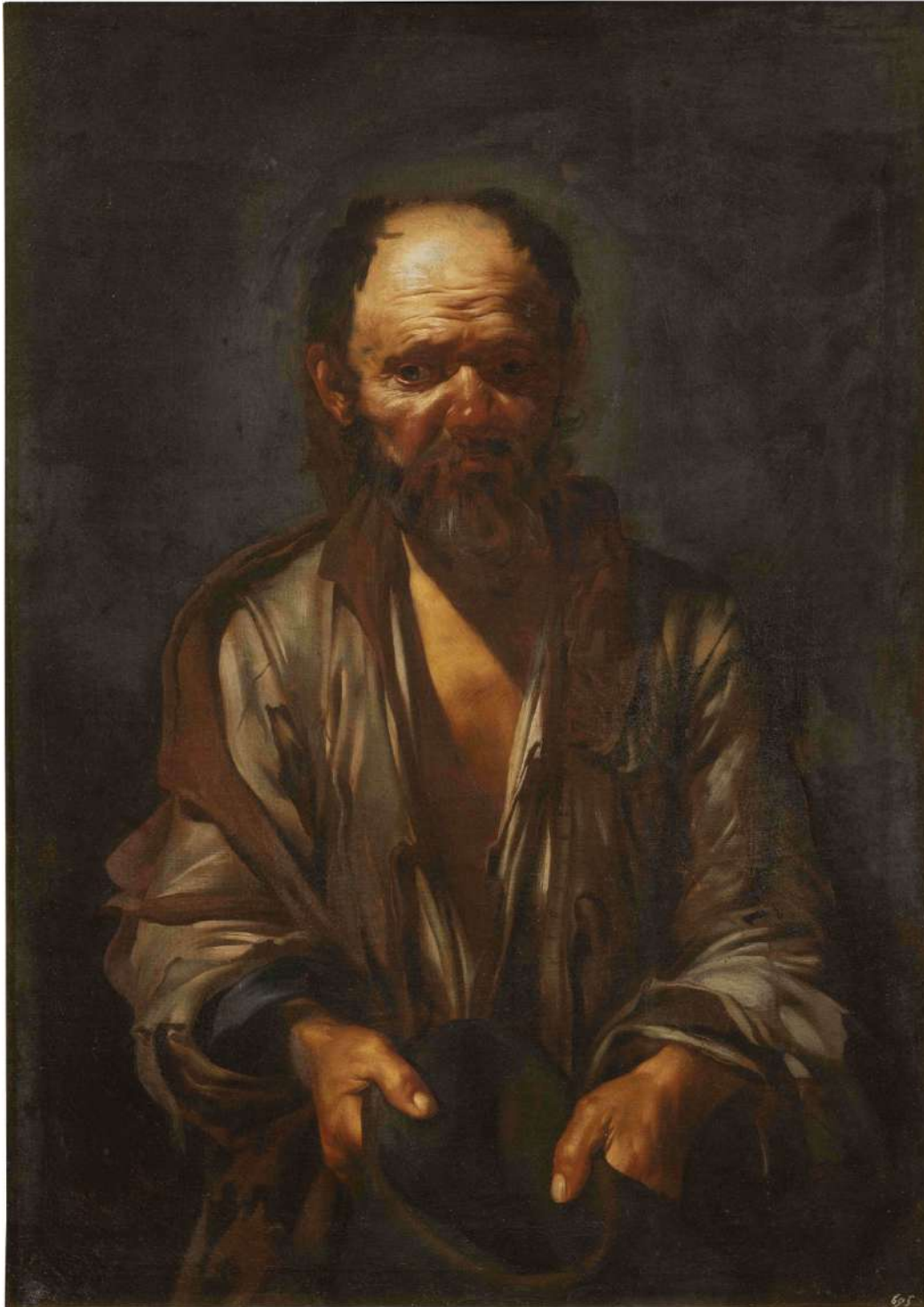


Fig. 1 Jusepe de Ribera, *Beggar*, circa 1612.

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Rome, Galleria Borghese.

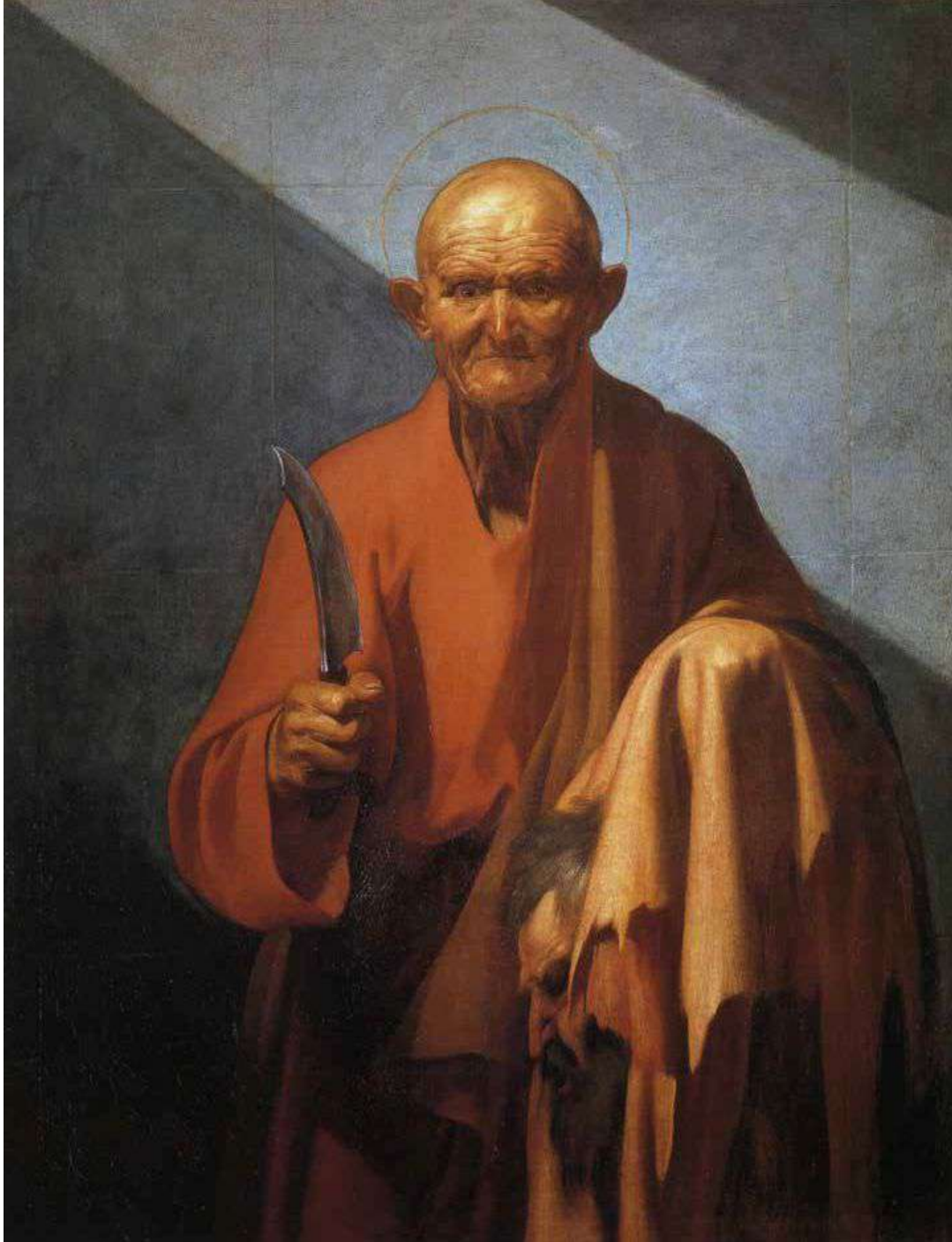


Fig. 2 Jusepe de Ribera, *Saint Bartholomew*, circa 1612.

Florence, Fondazione di Studi di Storia dell'Arte Roberto Longhi.

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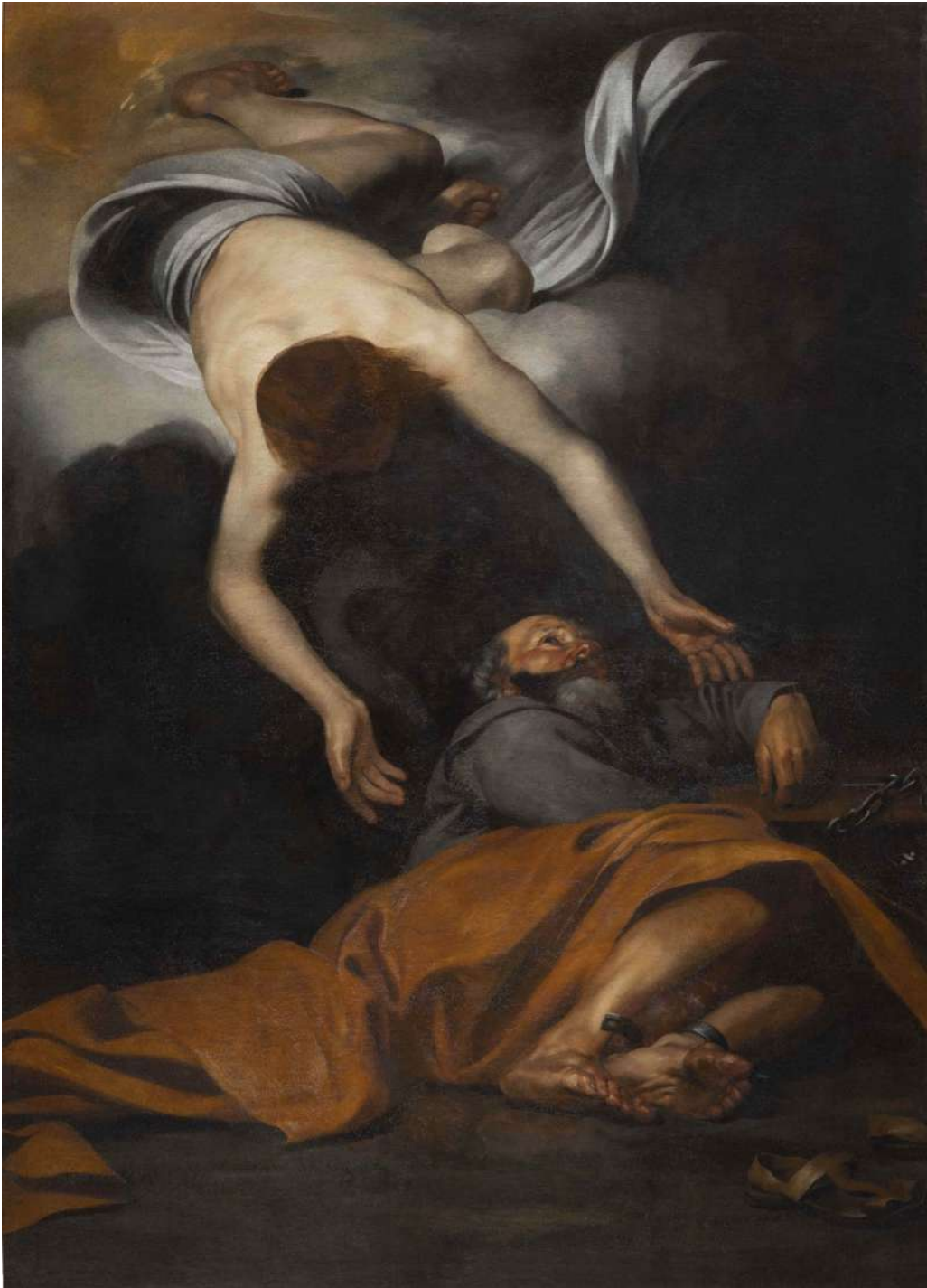


Fig. 3 Jusepe de Ribera, *The Liberation of Saint Peter*, circa 1613.
Rome, Galleria Borghese.

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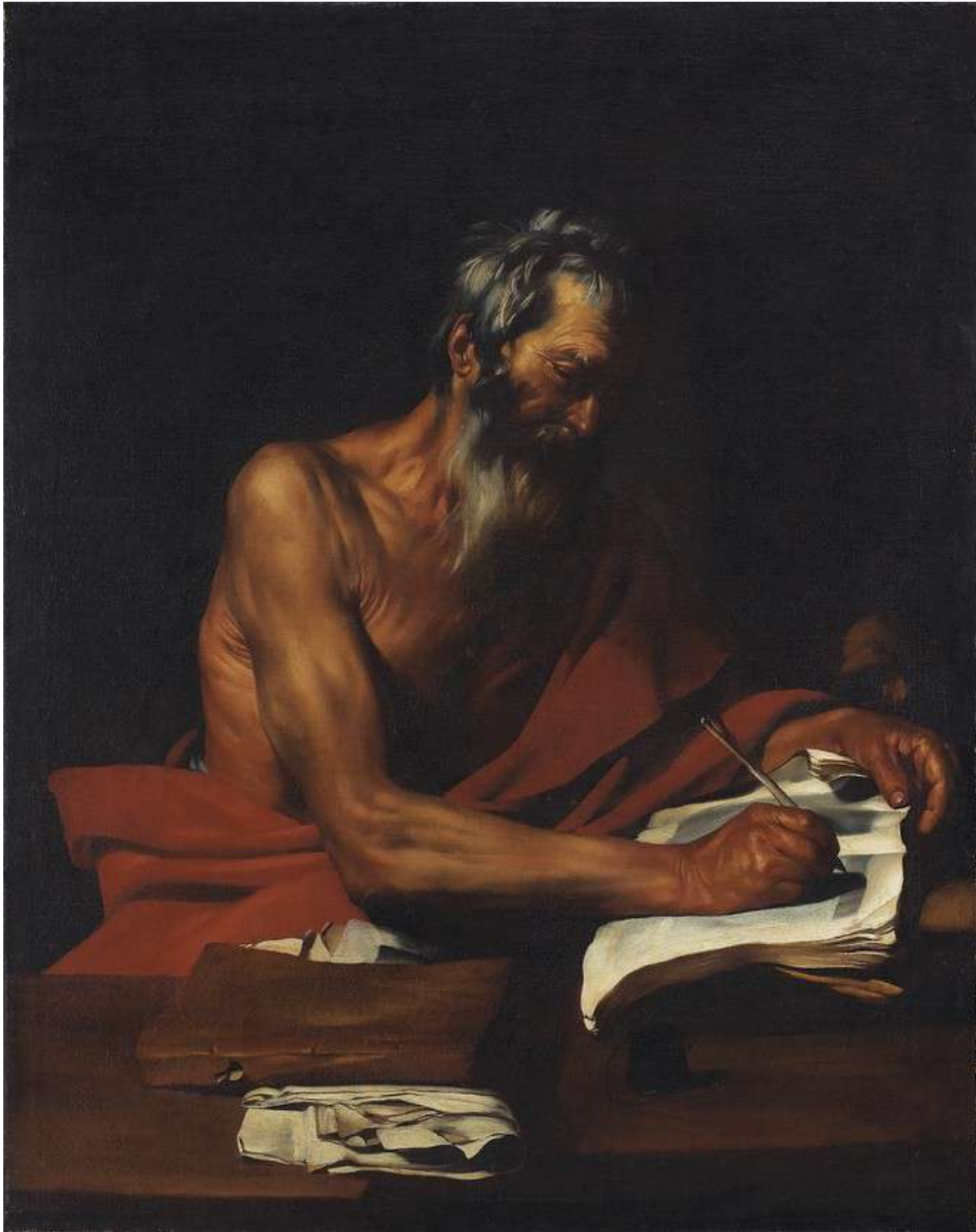


Fig. 4 Jusepe de Ribera, *Saint Jerome*, circa 1614-15.

Toronto, Art Gallery of Ontario.

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Footnotes

¹ See G. Papi, in *El Joven Ribera*, J. Portùs and J. Milicua (eds), exh. cat., Madrid 2011, pp. 32-37.

² Nicolson 1990, pp. 102-03; Spinosa 1992, p. 55. In 2002 Gianni Papi convincingly proved, further to stylistic analysis, the authorship of the *Beggar*, when he identified the work in the inventory of circa 1633 of Cardinal Scipione Borghese, where it is described as 'by Spagnoletto' (G. Papi, 'Jusepe de Ribera a Roma e il Maestro del Giudizio di Salomone', in *Paragone*, vol. LIII, 2002, pp. 26-27).

³ Spinosa 1992, p. 55.

⁴ Maccherini 1994, p. 279.

⁵ Papi 2007, p. 249.

⁶ Papi 2007, p. 252.